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# LEARNING BY DOING DESIGN: EDUCATIONAL EXPERIENCES TO PASS ON LOCAL TRADITION TO YOUNG PEOPLE

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## Abstract

The main objective of this research is to make children aware about the importance of local tradition and culture identities and to teach them these values in an informal way, through their involvement in different kind of learning experiences. The research has the intention to reach these goals communicating with children using their natural ways of expression, attitudes and generation cultures. The final aim intends to give children a basic knowledge about these traditional and local items to be used as starting point for future developments. Nowadays, this aim has a particular relevance as the cultural heritage of local territories is more and more becoming cultural asset to save in order to valorize the peculiarities of different cultures. At the same time young people are even more recognized by the society as the main actors of the future in preserving the cultural legacy.

The project covers many aspects of the local habits from traditional street games to local and oral tales. The starting point of the research is the raise of consciousness that children need to play all days as long time as possible; by playing they learn and experiment about their abilities and competences. According to these processes the research proposes a new collaborative approach in learning and sharing traditional values of territory using games, ludic experiences as educational tools for their cultural grow. Indeed, by playing with ad hoc designed games children become able to know traditions and values of their own territory, and also those one of the others.

Besides, the present work has developed a series of innovative games design, with friendly graphic user interfaces (both material and digital) to exemplify the research meaning.

This approach allows future generations to know local traditions of the past that otherwise risk to disappear. Thanks to these experiences children become also able to evaluate strengths and witnesses about the direction of development of habits and traditions and consequently able to propose in future new ones.

Keywords: local tradition, children, playing, design, educational experience, communication design.

## 1 INTRODUCTION: CONTEXT OF REFERENCE

### 1.1 The strategic value of traditions

Tradition is understood by today's society as the set of old beliefs, practices and customs handed down since generations. Each community has different habits and traditions, essential for the proper functioning of society. Nowadays we live in a society characterized by a plurality of traditions.

According to Anthony Giddens [1], "tradition" counts three key elements: firstly, it is a ritual, ceremonial form; secondly, it is collective and social by itself nature; finally, traditions have custodians. Furthermore, according to Giddens [1], a tradition is able to arouse emotions in the individuals of the community to which it refers, becoming important in claiming its identity in larger societies.

However, not everyone has such a benevolent view of tradition: "*L'internazionale*", an Italian newspaper, promotes an idea of society free from the "chains of tradition". This concept is one of the fundamental ideas of socialist / progressive thought, according to which the reason should be the only guidance for man.

Despite the current thought, in recent times it has been increasingly rediscovered the value of traditions and their importance in the development of a given territory, a concept already carried out by the most relevant authors of Romanticism, according to which folklore is "a national good, as an inextinguishable reservoir of ethno-cultural values, uses, customs [...]".

These days, cultural tourism is a strong strategic point for the growth of a territory. Cultural tourism revolves around traditions: travelers seek a real experience on those specific places. Thus, traditions make unique and special any given territory. [2]

A land rich in traditions is, therefore, interesting and attractive and can base on this a large part of its economy. For this reason, it is important to pass on the traditions of the territory to the new generations, through innovative methods that make it interesting to such a particular public.

## **1.2 Perception differences in older people and children**

"Traditions are transmitted by generations" is a popular saying diffused over the world. Each generation, instead, has its own knowledge base, which creates different understandings and interests. Nowadays, it is increasingly hard to pass on traditions because young people have always new knowledge to adding to the inherited ones that often risk to be forgotten. Besides, young people very often do not appreciate traditional values because considered boring and outdated whereas ancient traditions should represent the real cultural heritage able to connect different people to the same values. For this reason, it would be important for older citizens to accept the diversities and the languages of today's young people in order to convey those values and traditions of their culture. The different perception of tradition is due to the adults experience and different values connected to the historic period of their youth. On the other side, young people think and learn in a different way, according to the information era and their habit to be constantly connected to the social web. For this reason it is increasingly not easy to transmit traditions to young people, in order to preserve specific culture and local costumes.

It follows that it is necessary, for the survival of traditions, to define a new young people communication method, being able to use their daily language. The game is probably the right strategic universal medium, useful for the involvement of young people for entertainment, learning and transmitting traditions.

## **1.3 The importance of playing in children as means to communicate traditions**

To play is fundamental for the physical and mental development of the child as it helps him in the growth, to relate and to understand what surrounds him. For this reason, during childhood, playing is necessary for learning, as it is an essential cognitive and affective experience. According to Jean Piaget, the game is the tool for the study of child's learning process. Indeed, it is a spontaneous non-remunerative activity with which the child has fun, knows, learns and represents reality [3]. As in many educational models, as an example in Reggio Emilia's [4] and Montessori's [5] approaches, children have the opportunity to express themselves through playing and workshop activities that allow them to show their creativity and, at the same time, to learn by creating their own autonomy. For this reason playing activity should not be seen as a childish and useless action but as an important learning practice. Depending on the age of the child, it can assume completely different meanings, involving different users in different gaming experiences. "The play is the child's voice" [4], in fact, through this playful action, the child is able to communicate feelings and emotions. The Dutch psychologist Huizinga [6] has defined playing as an action, a free activity, in which the individual takes part by his own choice. Just like in many games, made up of rules, children learn to relate to others by following social rules that should follow in everyday life.

## **1.4 The state of the art**

As previously mentioned, traditions are today a very important lever for the socio-economic development of a particular place. In this regard, it is therefore essential to foster their passage to new generation, for not losing their memory. In recent times, the value of tradition has been rediscovered and re-evaluated, aware of the importance at a socio-economic level that it may have. Currently, on the world scene there are many examples of "methods" of plotting traditions, especially to the new generations, some more traditional, others more innovative.

The most widely used method worldwide, and perhaps the most "ancient", is certainly the book. There are countless books for children in which stories and legends of local tradition are told. However, these tools are not always "appealing" to a public as difficult as that of the new generation children, digital natives and accustomed to a very interactive method of learning / use.

On the international scene, festivals dedicated to anniversaries, local foods and customs are not directly addressed to children, but very often ad hoc activities are assigned to them. One example is the "Festival delle tradizioni" in Modigliano (MC), in which "Il Parco dello Stupore" was established, a space totally dedicated to children to learn about art, theater and local games through educational workshops. Another example is the Kinderzeche (Children's Festival) held in Dinkelshuhl, Franconia, every year in mid-July, which in December 2016 was recognized as an intangible cultural heritage, during which children celebrate the end of the school year.

The local traditions and customs of a territory may however be handed down to the new generations, usually using smartphones and tablets, with much more innovative tools than those mentioned above. A prime example of this are the interactive applications for reading and gaming, linked to a specific tradition. On the Italian national scene, for example, the application Art Stories, aimed at children in between 5 and 9 years old, should be mentioned, created with the intention of making the teaching of history more enjoyable for children. The first two experiences related to this app were developed around two symbols of the city of Milan: The Duomo and the Sforzesco Castle, to which was added the MUBA and its historical site. Another interesting example is CappuccinoApp, which has structured a product aimed at children from 1 to 4 years old, in which it is possible to learn about the most famous Italian fairy tales and, at the same time, learn both Italian and English. On the international scene, the most well known app is Cooking Mama. Created in 2006 and used by a multiplicity of users, the game is based on the preparation of some foods, most of them Japanese, thus contributing to their knowing on an international scale. Differentiated versions from the traditional one were then created, including Cooking Mama World Kitchen.

An additional very interesting tool to make children know about tradition, values and local customs are the animated films. In this sense, Disney "tells" legends, history and local customs since 1963, the year in which the film "The Sword in the Stone" was released, in which the legend of Arthur and Excalibur was proposed. However, the film in which the value of local traditions is more significant is certainly "Coco", an animated film from 2017, in which Walt Disney manages to "get" millions of children a tradition far away from them as that of *La día de los muertos*, and to explain to young viewers the importance and magnitude of popular / local / family traditions also in contrast with the spirit of innovation of young people. Producers Lee Unkrich and Adrian Molina have also included typical songs of the Mexican tradition, now known and sung by children all over the world.

Not to be forgotten are the numerous nature trails present throughout the Italian territory, born with the aim of making known to an increasingly wider and differentiated public, addressing especially the children's public, places of particular interest. Some routes in Trentino Alto Adige are examples, in which the child during the path is "entertained" by local stories and legends set in that particular territory.

A phenomenon not to be overlooked is that related to the use of Youtube by children. It is statistically proven that today 80% of children from 3 years age already use the platform. It is now certain that children, since they are little, are great digital experts: they use tablet and smartphone with confidence to find their favorite apps and contents, among which videos surely stand out, and they manage to keep them glued to the screen for hours. Recently, various research has been carried out on this phenomenon to understand which factors stimulate children to see online videos, often in a compulsively way.

In the wake of this phenomenon, the video content created by the youtuber Joe Natta from Lucca (Italy), who on his channel tells the children the legends of the Lucca area, should be taken as an example.

## **2 THE AIM OF THE RESEARCH**

The main objective of this research is to make children from five to eleven years old aware about the importance of local traditions and culture identities and to teach them these values in an informal way, through their involvement in different kind of learning experiences. According to these aims a specific goal of the research is to transmit local and territorial traditions to young people, as an important part of the cultural heritage. For this reason, this study aims to find new ways of communicating local habits to young people, able to pass them the largest quantity of information through different kinds of design experiences. These studied traditions are based especially on stories and recurring events which have been handed down orally for ages and now risk to disappear.

Besides, another specific goal of the work is to share the know-how deriving from traditional culture as starting point for future developments. To this end, the research individuates new possible uses of the ancient traditions adapting them to contemporary children's needs and habits.

Finally, another objective of this work is to individuate a referring set of elements, which can be useful to design communicative and experiential products able to pass on, actualize, promote local traditions, products and culture of specific territories to young people, as future generation.

### **3 METHODOLOGY**

The research uses a multidisciplinary approach involving different specialists from pedagogists to interaction and user experience designers, from psychologists to territory historians. For instance, the pedagogical science is important to individuate the needs of children/user related to their skills while the psychological approach helps to understand which activity/experience could be enjoyable and educational.

The Design has the role of the main actor in the entire design process, able to find sustainable solutions in relation to the other disciplines involved. Furthermore, the design activities refer to the UE/UI design and the human centred design approach.

Once ago, some kinds of local traditions were passed on through:

- oral stories and tales;
- recurrent festival based on important festivity;
- manual activities or rituals.

These ways of passing on local customs were based on experience activities, learning by doing and learning by listening. In the last fifty years of social development, the way to pass on and use local traditions has to change in accordance with the relation with the new public.

Playing is the main daily activity of children and, as a consequence, it is the best method to attract their attention. To reach this goal it is necessary to study children needs and behaviours according to ages groups, because children have different skills and desires from the birth to the teen age [5]. Due to a very large rank of playing activities, it is necessary to individuate those ones more interesting in relation to the territory and the kind of tradition to pass on.

In this way, the playing and related experiential activities become an active tool for the discovery of the world and for the understanding of culture evolution. It is therefore essential to design product/service systems capable of attracting the child, involving him in the activity to be performed, so as to "assimilate" the contents related to tradition. The use of children languages coming from their collective imaginary becomes a fundamental starting point to capture their attention.

In some of the analysed cases, as explained below, it was necessary to carry out some happenings together with children, through co-working activities. The strategy of involving little users in co-working is necessary for highlighting the imaginary of children in relation to the different topics dealt with. These co-working activities were carried out inside schools or in common spaces already known to children and under educators' supervision. This is an important task because it makes designers thinking in an innovative way [7].

In order to determine new strategies for communicating local tradition to young people, it is not sufficient to consider only the "tradition", i.e. a single "product", a tale, a festival an experience, but the "use" scenario and context of reference at 360°, its culture and related society.

The work suggests the extension of the investigation from a specific local approach to a wider context. According to this idea, the game as a "material object", become not only the historical memory, the "witness" but a new way for describing traditional, social, cultural, historical and territorial phenomena.

#### **3.1 Applied method and case study**

To reach the aim of the paper, a project workshop was arranged with a group of students attending the third year of the industrial design degree course at the University of Florence.

The group consisted of 80 students, coming from different countries (Italy, China, France, Switzerland, Spain, Holland, Ireland, Philippines, Dominican Republic, Iran, Serbia, Ecuador) aged between 21 and

25 years. During the workshop each student had the task of analyzing and reinterpreting a specific tradition of his own territory, to design an innovative product for children aged 5-11 years.

Local costumes were selected after a series of field researches (i.e.: interviews to the older people of a specific territory and studies in local archives) based on their importance in their referring context and according to the values to pass on.

Moreover, the tradition chosen had to have the possibility to involve and interact children and it was chosen according the four categories as below:

1. oral legend/story/tale;
2. popular exhibition/
3. traditional festival;
4. playing experience.

The experiments involved the students that investigated about the local tradition chosen, often observing children or making co-working activities with them at school, to highlight their imaginary in relation to the different customs and also to test and verify possible solutions.

The research work was structured into four steps and lasted for five months.

1. *Research and interviews with local people*

During the first step of the research, the students were asked to look for a tradition linked in some way to the children's public in their reference territory. As many of those were handed down only orally, it was necessary to interview the elderly of the place to better understand the reference tradition. The interviews were conducted directly by the students in places frequented by the locals in which they felt confident.

2. *Presentation and Infographics of the chosen tradition*

During the second phase of the work the students were asked for a preliminary collective presentation of the chosen tradition. Following the study of the graphic language most suited to the children's public, the students created an infographic with the aim of explaining to children, in the simplest and most immediate way possible, the current tradition.

3. *Final processing of the products*

During the third phase of the work the students designed "products" to pass on tradition. The products (tangible or intangible) had the aim of making the new generations aware about the ancient traditions in an innovative way. For the realization of the models or prototypes, some of the students worked closely with local small enterprises, in order to improve the local productions.

4. *Future development of projects*

Since the first design phases, some of the students interfaced directly with associations, local authorities, institutions and reference municipalities of the involved territory, in order to "rebuild" the chosen tradition as much as possible on a historical level. This allowed the students to present their projects directly to the institutions, allowing many of them to be taken into consideration for prototyping and marketing.

## **4 RESULTS AND CONCLUSIONS**

The final objective of the work is to gain a more effective preservation of cultural heritage to be realized involving young people as actors of the next future.

The research analysis underlined the necessity of individuate a series of different solutions to pass on and promote traditions according to different culture, customs and territory. The proposed solutions allow a wide audience of children to understand local culture and consequently enable them to use this knowledge in future. This gained awareness can become a multiplier factor allowing other people to communicate, pass and spread more and more culture values representing the territorial identity.

It is worth noticing that this research uses graphic design as the main language to communicate, by considering it as a universal means of communication with children, starting from different backgrounds and cultures.

The research identified a series of data to know in order to design new products for passing on local tradition to young people. For each type of chosen tradition to be handed down, it is necessary to identify before designing the following data:

- the country;
- recurrent date or season;
- specific area where it takes place (in square, in the historic center, at home...);
- occasion recurrence (anniversary, country patron, ...);
- what is it about;
- what is the meaning;
- which are the values to pass on
- which is the teaching for children;
- current methods used to pass on tradition;
- strengths and weaknesses of the local tradition;
- elements to actualize and to updated.

Moreover, some experimentations made during the workshop with the university students and also the co-working activities together with children at school, show which and how the activities are able to communicate, interact and to be used easily and joyful by children according to their learning goals. As a consequence, the research individuated new uses of the ancient traditions adapting themselves to contemporary needs. Consistent with these goals, the research proposes the following design solutions according to four different typologies:

1. material game
2. virtual game / app
3. experience / workshop
4. book / eBook

According to these typologies, children should learn about local habits and costumes in an informal way, by enjoying their experience. The final results of the work have seen the realization of some products realized by students with the support of local authorities, which have been used by a wide number of children with the consequent achievement of the proposed objectives that led to the dissemination of the hypothesized results. The realized projects were:

- Star palio game in box (a material game kit). This experiential game kit collects the various activities of the traditional festival of "giostra della stella" in a game of goose type. At the same time the proposed activities have to be acted really from the players during the game. The festival takes place in Bagno a Ripoli, a small town near Florence, the second Sunday of September;
- Sartiglietta app (a skill game as virtual one). The gaming app tells the Sartiglia festival, a tradition of the city of Oristano in Sardinia, organized during the Carnival period. The aim of the game is to have the player "su componidori" collecting as many stars as possible. The application also allows the child a complete customization of the game character.
- Feast of St. John (an experiential kit). During the night of Saint John in Cadiz, Spain, people use to meet together on the beach where they light a bonfire, eat together and at midnight they throw their desires into the sea. The kit offers a specific experience for the child during that night party. The kit contains an illustrated book explaining the origins of the party, the recipes of the traditional dishes and everything needed to be able to redo them at home. It also contains a small bracelet to be worn by the child in order to do not getting lost during the party.
- Who's afraid of the Gatta Gnuda (an e-book). It is an e-book based on oral tale. The gaming book tells children the true story of Gatta Gnuda, a legendary Tuscan character, often used to scare children. The character, reinterpreted according to the new pedagogical theories,

becomes a friend of the child in the book tale, teaching him places, foods and traditions typical of the Mugello area.

Finally, on one hand the work has also made students interested in further studying the traditions linked to their territory in a more in-depth and critical way, and interfaced directly with the institutions, to make them known the importance and the necessity to invest in projects aimed to pass on the traditions. On the other hand, it allowed a participatory experience in which all the students involved were able to learn about traditions and customs of other places thanks to the presentations of their colleagues. This allowed them to understand the differences between the various cultures, but also to know how a tradition can change from country to country, thus enriching its own cultural baggage.

In conclusion, the outputs of this research allow to preserve values and know-how related to a territory and at the same time give new points of views for maintaining and reinterpreting tradition. The results of the work brought to a more effective preservation of cultural heritage involving children and young people as actors of the next future.

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